JBLM community honors Native American culture

BY RUTH KINGSLAND
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Colorful dances and the dramatic tale told of a young Navajo woman who served as a nurse during World War II made for a meaningful ethnic celebration as Joint Base Lewis-McChord service members gathered for a ceremony at Carey Theater Nov. 22.

The event was JBLM’s celebration of the 2016 National Native American Indian Heritage Month and was sponsored by I Corps, 7th Infantry Division and the 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division.

Sergeant First Class Brian R. Smith, 2nd Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Bde. 2nd Inf. Div., helped plan the event.

“I’ve been looking forward to (the event) because it’s all about learning about other cultures,” he said. “This is an educational experience to say the least.”

The JBLM event featured several styles of pow wow dances performed by 1st Lt. Thomas Bluestone.

1st Lt. Thomas Bluestone performs a traditional dance during a National Native American Indian Heritage Month event Nov. 22.

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Bluestone joined the Army in 2005 and has been at JBLM since 2014. He said he’s proud of his family’s heritage and glad to share aspects of his culture through JBLM events.

“We (Native Americans) are a very small minority in this country,” he said. “But our culture is rich, and it’s our responsibility to share and sustain it.”

There’s been a national Native American Indian Heritage Month since November 1990, when it was proclaimed by former President George H.W. Bush.

Earlier attempts to honor American Indians included a 1915 proclamation issued by Red Fox James, a Blackfoot Indian, after he rode horseback from state to state seeking approval for a date to honor Native Americans. James garnered the endorsement of 24 state governments, but no national recognition was proclaimed.

The first American Indian Day was observed in New York one year later, by proclamation of that state’s governor, according to information provided on nativeamericanheritagemonth.gov.

At the JBLM event, actress Rachae Thomas, of Living Voices nonprofit theater troupe in Seattle, provided a one-woman production of “Native Visions.” She shared a brief story of a young Navajo woman, named Alice, who was taken from her home to grow up in a government-run boarding school.

Thomas’ depiction told of the young girl’s struggles to retain her heritage and healing traditions and continue her relationship with her cousin, Carl, who joined the military while Alice was going through nursing school and serving as a nurse in World War II. Carl became one of the Navajo Code Talkers who were able to use their native language as an unbreakable code for the military.

“We could not have won the war in the Pacific without the Navajo Code Talkers,” Thomas’ character said.

Private First Class Ian Dickenson, 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Bde., 2nd Inf. Div., watched the presentation with interest, as he sat among the few hundred service members in the auditorium.

“I really enjoyed it all,” he said. “It was a cultural experience you don’t get very often in the Army. It was very unique and educational.”